

## Summers in Falmouth

*Anne Swift Sawyer*

Since the founding of Falmouth over three hundred years ago, generations of Swifts have enjoyed summers in Falmouth. Our forebears, founders and builders of the town, left a heritage of deep attachment to the area to their descendants even though the bustling Falmouth of today is very different from the small 17th century villages connected by horse, carriage, ship and kinship: a Falmouth without churches where the settlers travelled each Sunday to Barnstable to worship, a Falmouth of small farms, salt works, and self-sufficiency.

The Swifts began as farmers in Hatchville, became carpenters and then builders of whaling ships. In 1827, Oliver Swift brought his bride, Eliza Jenkins, to the large white house on the village green that is now the parsonage next to the Congregational Church. Their gardens, shed and pasture stretched back to include what is now the Lawrence School property.



The ancestral Swift house on the Village Green in Falmouth. Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.

The Swifts went to Florida for live oak “knees” and other timber needed for building their whaling ships. My grandfather, Elijah Swift II, was lumbering in Florida at the outbreak of the Civil War and had to flee north. During the war, he served in the Union forces, was wounded, captured and then freed by the Union forces. After the war, he joined his uncle, James Jenkins, in the lumber business in Wisconsin, but every summer he returned to the Falmouth home of his father, Oliver Swift which he and his brother inherited. Grandfather Swift brought his horses with him for the summer in a freight car, but left his wagons in Wisconsin since their axle width differed from those of Falmouth roads.

When I asked, “What did the children do in Falmouth summers when you were a child?” my father rather indignantly replied that, of course, they did just about what we did in the 20s and 30s when I was growing up. Swimming, tennis, boating and riding were enjoyed in this bucolic town by the sea.

During my youth stores were few and confined to Main Street and window shopping was not yet considered a pastime. There must have been some duplication of shops but not the proliferation of stores that crowd Falmouth today. When Harvey’s Hardware opened, for example, we wondered if there would be enough business for another such store besides Eastman’s. Groceries were delivered by Ten Acre and

E.E.C. Swift; children did not go shopping with their parents to be tempted by gum, candy and magazines.

Seventy years ago, as children visiting my aunt, Leila Chute, in the family home on the green, we played in an old dory tied up to a tree by Shiverick's Pond, explored the gardens behind the house and made up romantic stories about the widow's walk still visible on the roof of the parsonage.

For nine years our summers were spent in what was Richard Olney's house at the corner of Mill Road and Surf Drive. According to family lore, possibly exaggerated, the autocratic Mr. Olney built this large house as a surprise for his bride. Since it stood alone in what seemed to her a remote area, her reaction was not all he desired when she saw the completed house for the first time. Olney had been Secretary of State under Grover Cleveland and his large house was then owned by his daughter, Mrs. Agnes Minot, who spent summers with her son's family in the former overflow house on the property. Her granddaughter, Olney Minot, was our constant companion.

Olney and my sister, Katharine, both three years my senior, allowed me to be a part of their Discovery Club. Thus bonded together we boated in a derelict skiff in the Herring Brook, poling upstream until stopped by a barbed wire fence. We trespassed on the Spaulding and Harding properties along Mill Road, hiding under bushes and behind trees in the roles of out-

laws and other exciting fugitives. The day came, however, when we were scared off by the gardener. I will always remember rushing home to hide under my bed fearing the worst. Less exciting, but good fun, was damming up the banks of the Herring River as it reached the shore. Storms often did our work for us, completely closing the outlet. Then we dug to free the stream.

The Discovery Club naturally had to have a club house which Olney, Katharine and I began building by placing four boards in a square with others nailed on top of them. We planned to create a doorway out of the completed square. This exciting project was interrupted by the unwelcome news that the Swifts had guests and we were summoned to be polite to Bill and Jack Sawyer from Worcester and the Quissett Harbor House. I have banished from memory what we said to them, and the club house never grew taller. Jack evidently forgave me.



The Olney house, originally built as a surprise for Richard Olney's bride in the late 19th century and rented by the Swift family in the 1920s and early 30s. July 9, 1927. Courtesy Katharine Swift Almy.



Postcard featuring the Olney house.  
Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.

The Olney house at the corner of Mill Road and Surf Drive. "There was a very large area of lawn surrounded by a huge privet hedge. There were two jointly owned grass tennis courts where the neighborhood gathered on weekends." Late 1920s. Courtesy Katharine Swift Almy.



The Olney bath house on Surf Drive beach in the 1920s, an inconspicuous harbinger of the stilt-legged flock that arrived in the 1990s. Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.



Herring River flowing from Siders Pond under the stone bridge at Surf Drive to reach Vineyard Sound. Olney house on the left. 1932. Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.



*Windigo*, the Swift's Herreshoff 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  footer lies in Quissett Harbor to the left of fishing boat *Grace Lucy* in the foreground. Captain Eldred's boatyard in background, 1931. Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.

Although we did sail in Quissett, our friends were largely in our own neighborhood. From Shore Street came Nancy, Polly and Joan Gay, also Joan Leonard and Ruth Lilly; and on Thomas Lane was the crippled Priscilla Schenck. This motley group of girls, including Katharine, Olney and myself plus Eleanor Blevins (later Zinn), went under parental pressure to Priscilla Schenck's. Her formidable nurse, Miss Robey, organized card games and refreshments which Priscilla seemed to enjoy despite her paralysis and speech difficulties. On occasions we rode with her in her pony cart. Ruth Lilly was part of the Priscilla Schenck entourage, but not, as I remember, her

brother, Joe, who joined us in other games such as racing periwinkle snails on the Old Stone Dock. Joe was my age and the older girls teased him about his father's Milk of Magnesia which he, Joe, was going to have to drink.

Our favorite card game was Pounce at which Katharine and I got quite good to the detriment of our fingernails and our older sister, Betty, who occasionally got inveigled into this warfare.

As a teenager she was more interested in other pursuits and even had a one line part in the University Players' performance of *Lysistrata*, causing parental discussion.

In Quissett my family kept a big wooden dinghy at Eldred's boatyard. It was equipped with heavy oars and oarlocks in place ready to go with no thought of theft. Sailing lessons in our Beetle cat, *Sea Robin*, from Captain Roy Chadwick, didn't cure me from jibing. Bobbie Johnstone, whose family owned all of Cumloden, and I were the menace of the inner harbor as we jibed hitting first one boat and then another and maybe a third. We remained good friends in spite of banged heads.

Unlike me, Bobbie and her two sisters Yvonne and Mary Louise were proficient riders. In the 1920s and 30s, Mrs. Littlefield had a riding stable on Depot Avenue where her son, Bill Littlefield, later had his art studio. Falmouth traffic was such that we could ride on the side of the highway to Goodwill Park, to the bridle paths where Greengate is today, to the Beebe Woods and, most fun of all, to Racing Beach. That beach was then lightly used and we rode along the water's edge slowly, not racing our ponies as the Indians are reputed to have done, a legend perpetuated in the name.



Bobby Johnstone sailing the *Sea Robin* in Quissett Harbor. 1931.  
Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.

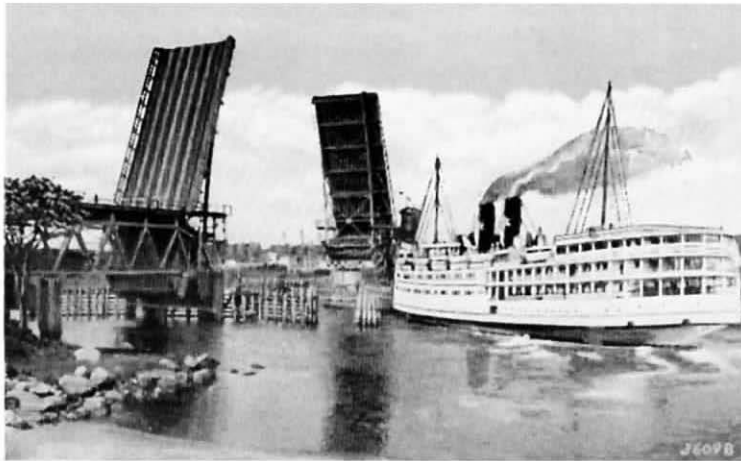
Life was leisurely for children of my generation who did not have to work in the summers and the three months of vacation stretched lazily on without responsibilities. At Falmouth's one movie theater, the Elizabeth, movies were screened for suitability. For us, they were completely prohibited during the polio season. There was a lot of time for reading, card games, puzzles, croquet.

We had friends with whom we devised amusements, but compared to the schedules set up for today's children our lives were more family oriented, with entertainment left up to us, although my mother tried hard to schedule swimming, sailing and riding lessons. There was lots of reading, time to be just children, so we wore our bloomers



Frankie Minot rowing Olney Minot and Anne Swift in the Herring River. "The boat on Herring River was a great adventure. It served as ferry, pirate ship and other purposes. Frankie Minot was about four years younger than Anne, was allowed by sufferance to join." Circa 1927. Courtesy Katharine Swift Almy.

and middy tops, climbed trees, hung upside down on the swing set unselfconsciously. We liked Falmouth, only vaguely realizing that our roots lay in its history as each summer we waited for the drawbridge over the Cape Cod Canal to come down so that our parents' heavily laden car, complete with suitcases on the running boards, could bring us here. How fortunate we were and how innocent.



Boston to New York Steamer passing through Cape Cod Canal. Anne Swift Sawyer remembers waiting impatiently for the drawbridge to come down so that her parents' loaded car could take them across to the freedom of another summer on the Cape. Courtesy Anne Swift Sawyer.

Anne Swift Sawyer has spent all her summers on the Cape, first in Hyannisport and then beginning in the 20s in Falmouth. She now lives year round in Woods Hole. A graduate of Smith College, she married Jack Sawyer (mentioned in her article) in 1941. After teaching school in Cambridge, Anne lived in New Haven and Williamstown where her husband was President of Williams College. They moved to New York City in 1974 where she was an active volunteer at the Morgan Library. Anne Sawyer has always been interested in Falmouth and her Swift family history.